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AUTHOR Wolfe, Frank
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ABSTRACT

In translating perception into written language, a child must learn an encoding process which is a continuation of the process of improving sensing of the world around him or her. To verbalize an object (a perception) we use frames which name a referent, locate the referent in space and time, identify its appearance and behavior, and define terms of reference and function. Language, then, is a way of signalling what is cut in the world and the writer's prime concern is to supply as clean a signal as possible. The listener/reader then functions as an evaluator of incoming information by comparing the information it carries to all other information which can be brought to bear. In learning to unlock sentence ideas, it is necessary to get at the frames. The key is VSC (verb, subject, complement) which provides the bridge from syntax to lexicon, from word to idea frame. As the teacher helps the student learn the key, the student discovers how to process information. (TJ)

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SYNTAX AND SEMANTICS: A TEACHING MODEL

Frank Wolfe
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Abstract

In the belief that ordinary language functions first as an articulating of perception, the author offers a method in grammatical analysis directed toward initial needs of children in the intermediate school. That grammar can serve as the precursor to logic is not at issue. It is suggested that developmental procedures for relating perception to language can be accomplished through the use of a mediating structure called the "ID frame". This three-slot frame can be used both as an introduction to surface structures and as the sustaining device in a system of grammar.

Quite on his own, a child develops a capacity for sensing what-is-there. Early on, he sees order in accidence, re-cognizes reappearance, reads regularity into collocation of particulars, adjusting meantime to the demands of whatever authority reveals itself in his immediate world. Somewhat later, we teachers leap to assist, crying: "Fear not, my son, for you are not alone. There is, too, vicarious experience; this and the meaning of your own experience will come to you by way of print. You must read." Whereupon, we set about installing in him letter recognition; yet a little while, and we shall be asking him to attend to that most ubiquitous of mysteries - the sentence.

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The child is led to believe that print consciousness will provoke an improvement in his sensing. Later, having progressed to a sufficient awareness of speech-sound through spelling-pattern, he will be ready to approach reality as it is reflected in written language. Letter leads at last to context, and again we teachers are ready: since the child has already learned to accept the miraculous illogicality of the seeing of sound, it would seem that he should accept the need to perceive conception. Reality, we assure him, is rendered (properly) as a subject-plus-predicate affair - the perceivable is "really" what is predicated upon a "subject".

What every child knows, our admonition notwithstanding, is that what is there is "really" an object. His regularities are perceptual patterns; for him, only the perceived is the intelligible. The rest is simply magic (or purposeless game), whether or not it be accompanied by the fulminations of Authority. Had he access, he would probably quote Ortega: "Well, now: when some reality collides with another object which we denominate 'conscious subject', the reality responds to the subject by appearing to it. Appearance is an objective quality of the real, its response to a subject." [1] (We need only be patient. Next year's child will probably invoke Piaget's deployment of "accommodation" and "assimilation".)

It is precisely here, I believe, that we do the child a disservice, in that we misdirect him. We offer him at this juncture not extension of miracle but illogicality of method. The child anticipates Locke: instead, we introduce him to Plato. (Robins reports that it was Plato who identified "the fundamental division of the Greek sentence into a nominal and a verbal component, <u>onoma</u> and <u>rhema</u>, which remained the primary grammatical distinction underlying syntactic analysis and word classification in all future linguistic description." [2])

V.Z. Panfilov has supplied an update of Plato's distinction: "The components of the syntactical level of language - the grammatical subject and the grammatical predicate - are developed within a language as specific forms for expressing the logical categories of the subject and the predicate." [3] (Update in time, indeed, but the theory has progressed no farther than the Scholastics: grammar is nothing but the hand-maiden to logic. Perhaps we should recall that there are in existence more languages which are incapable of subject/predicate analysis than there are languages which will lend themselves to this kind of initial reduction. [4])

We keep on ignoring the fact that the child is moving from the world to language. His quest is not to seek the means by which a concept is "decoded" into propositional language, but to identify the means by which a percept is encoded in print. Just as spelling-pattern to speech-sound is a reasonably straightforward coding of what is heard, just so should print be expected to provide a code for what is seen. And of course it does provide one (Whorf kept insisting that we look for it), but our methodology remains firmly committed to the venerable "sentence", and that not as an artifact of print but as "a group of words which express ("expresses"?) a complete thought."

Decency requires that we try after first things first. How does an object perceived become an object verbalized? How is an object said?

I believe there are four essential operations.

1. We name a referent.
2. We locate a referent in space and time.
3. We identify a referent's appearance and behaviour.
4. We define our terms of reference and function.

(1) The first move in verbal portraiture is to single out an object-of-discourse. Whether the allusion be to the real or the fanciful, naming is the act of pointing to (something) through the use of a language particle.

(2) Having assigned a name, we might choose to locate the referent by telling where it can be found. Often, we include a reference to time.

We're in school again today.

St. Pierre lies south of Newfoundland.

Joe was in London last week.

(3) We can name a referent, we can situate it in space and time, and we can specify its appearance and behaviour. This identification involves two kinds of ID frames ("eye dee"). These structures account for most of the utterances in ordinary verbal discourse.

Appearance

A-1 "Most bears are fat."
(We assign a characteristic to a referent.)

A-2 "Most bears are clowns."
(We type a referent by assigning it to a class.)

Behaviour

B-1 "Most bears hibernate."
(We describe the behaviour of a referent.)

B-2 "Bears eat fish."
(We describe the behaviour of referents in an interaction setting.)

"What can I say?" (I.e., "How can I express my impressions?") "Well, what would you like to write about?" "My pony." "All right, then tell me what your pony is like and how it acts." (The result will be a multiple of ID frames, offered singly or in combination as punctuated in sentence form.)

(4) Definition involves the possible substitution of an equivalent form (X = Y). This is most often a matter of usage and not a matter of logic.

Let go the anchor!

Pitch the hook!

Heave the iron!

Douse the killick!

Each of these expressions contains two elements, any one of which can be substituted for another - vertically, that is. By the same token, each expression in its entirety is equivalent to any other, in meaning if not in propriety. A speaker's choice of element will be constrained by his social context and his knowledge of available terms. (The first expression is formal Navy; the second and third I have heard on the Atlantic coast, though on different boats; the fourth expression is standard Newfoundland.)

The question "What is a frog?" can be handled with an ID frame response, but "What does 'frog' mean?" refers to something <u>inside</u> language and calls for a recital of past performances of the word itself. Within the limits of ordinary language, objects and events come to "mean" to the extent that each can be named, located, and identified, in words already available. We cannot "define" an object or event (we can only describe it); we can, however, define the words we use, by specifying their applicability in discourse. A dictionary is a compendium of such specifications.[5]

What is the primary purpose in discourse? It is to describe individual objects and events (i.e., this referent is and does). We begin by naming the referent, after which our talking-about serves to locate, to assign a characteristic, to assign to a class, to describe behaviour, and to describe the goings-on in an inter-activity setting. The discourse system includes an adjustment device, too, in that we can supply a language particle itself as referent, then to define the particle by listing contexts in which it has already demonstrated a certain use. (WEBSTER'S THIRD lists eighteen definitions for the word "frog".)

I believe that language is a measuring device - we scale reality, so to speak. Ordinary language is not, however, a mathematical device, because only propositional language shares the logical underpinning of mathematics. Ordinary language is not a set of symbols but a set of signals. With it, we attempt to signal what is out there in the world.

Since by this perspective a writer's prime concern is to supply as clean a signal as possible, it follows that sloppy punctuation, careless spelling, a misplaced modifier, a missing complement, a butchered noun plural and a dropped s on a third person singular verb form can all be judged incorrect to the extent to which each error is likely to misdirect a reader. Just so, reasonably accurate articulation is expected of a speaker. There are additional concerns, to be sure (matters of rhetoric, in the main), but it is essential, early on, that the student be made aware of the possible effect of noise in a signal.

To function as a listener/reader is to function as an evaluator of incoming information. That is to say, the evaluator judges (for himself) the evidentiary worth of an expression. Here, our model can function to identify specific evidence.

1. Is the referent's name in error?
2. Is the location of the referent given correctly?
3. Is the referent characterized correctly? (the A-1 frame)
4. Is the referent typed correctly? (the A-2)
5. Is the referent's behaviour described correctly? (the B-1)
6. Is the interactivity described correctly? (the B-2)

In the end, we judge the adequacy of an expression by questioning its worth in describing what is the case. (We question its "aptness".) And we do this by comparing the information it carries to all other such information we can bring to bear. From the evaluator's perspective: "How well does this (given) expression describe its referent, as I have come to know this referent to this point?" Bluntly: "Can this evidence be corroborated?" If the expression in question is the only source, then it carries, at least, face value.[6]

A language signal affords both evidence of things seen and a way of seeing. Knowledge-carrier and perception-extender, ordinary language is both describer and probe: it is used selectively to report certain data. Thus we can judge signaling worth, too, according to whether the expression-maker has attended to the requirements of the signaling system itself, beginning with word order and inflection - the syntactical aspect. The speaker/writer signals more or less noisily; the listener/reader converts the signal more or less efficiently. Both, presumably, convert meanings, albeit from different directions.

With the model introduced here, I believe we can identify what John Dewey called "categories of description, conceptions required to state the fact in question".[7] Ordinary language points to referents and carries certain information about them. Dewey again: "Objects are precisely what we are aware of. For objects are events with meanings".[8] I have attempted here to model these meanings, insofar as they can be expressed in referential language.

Coda - the VSC Key

Reading to recognize ideas could be made easier for the reader, at least at first, if the print were arranged as a series of numbered expressions. This is not now the case, however, nor is it likely to become the way paragraphs are written. Writing occurs as sentences; sentences, in turn, are composed of ID frames. In order to unlock sentence ideas, it is necessary to get at the frame(s).

Here we do have a key - VSC. There are three steps to the unlocking process: one guess and two questions. Answers to the questions will prove whether the guess was right or wrong.

Most pencils are yellow.

Step 1 Look at each word in turn until you can guess which word is a being or doing element. In the sentence above: are . (Verb)

Step 2 Ask the question "What is (or does)?" In the sentence above: pencils (are) . (Verb/Subject)

Step 3 Ask the question "What is (or does) what?" In the sentence above: pencils are yellow (V/S/Complement)

In this manner, the VSC key reveals the framework of a description-category. Verb/subject/complement (in the order of determination) form the skeleton to which all the remaining words of the frame are attached.

The Atlantic salmon is a beautiful fish.

Step 1 Is .

Step 2 What is? Salmon is .

Step 3 What is what? Salmon is fish .

The young woman sang an old ballad.

Step 1 Sang .

Step 2 What sang? Woman sang .

Step 3 Woman sang what? Woman sang ballad .

The young woman sang beautifully.

1. Sang 2. Woman sang 3. Woman sang beautifully

The complement element ("beautifully") describes the verb rather than the subject. The frame, a B-1, calls attention to the singing rather than to the singer. There is no second "what", but a "how". Even so, this much is revealed in the very process of asking the second "what" question. Thus the key question elicits the identification.

I returned a book to the library today.

I returned today to the library.

"Today" is not a <u>what</u>, but a "when". Again, this much is revealed during the process of asking the key question. In sum, the VSC key supplies the bridge between syntax and lexicon. This is how we travel from word to idea frame.

(Note: "Subject" is taken to mean no more than "subject of a verb form". The term "predicate" is not used at all, though its use in logic is, of course, not denied.)

Postscript

The final entry on the list of objectives supplied in the CURRICULUM GUIDELINE for the Intermediate Division, English, Ministry of Education, Ontario (1977) reads as follows:

> - become aware of the many ways in which language and literature can enrich life, recognizing that the power of language may be used both <u>for</u> and <u>against</u> one, and that it is useful to remain linguistically fit. [9]

Nowhere here (or anywhere else in the GUIDELINE) is there any hint that the study of English is an easy matter involving no more than an occasional exchange of pleasantries. Indeed, no one can become "linguistically fit" by way of some set of fortuitous insights - language development requires sustained, rigourous study. This has always been so; only the times have changed. Today's student is surrounded by a multiplicity of multidimensional stimuli in a child's world we adults never knew. Therefore, I believe there is little we can accomplish in our entreating the student to attend to only one source of information - ourselves alone. Francis Hunkins put it thus:

> The crucial note for us as inservice or prospective teachers is that we must alter our primary role of "teller" of information to that of designer of situations in which students can process information. [10]

We can teach a student <u>how</u> to process information. In this we find our own peculiar value: this a student can learn only by working with a teacher.

Notes

1. Jose Ortega y Gasset, THE MODERN THEME, New York: Harper, 1961. pages 142, 143

2. R.H. Robins, A SHORT HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967, page 26

3. V.Z. Panfilov, GRAMMAR AND LOGIC, The Hague: Mouton, 1968, page 102

4. Colin Turbayne, THE MYTH OF METAPHOR, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962, page 94

5. (A distinction drawn very carefully by W.H. Leatherdale must be given all due consideration here. "Verbal equivalence (which might be called the 'dictionary fallacy' of meaning) is not meaning, and . . . words only have meanings in their contexts. Indeed, it might be said that, in an important sense, only sentences have meaning and that words derive their meaning from the sentences in which they occur." THE ROLE OF ANALOGY, MODEL AND METAPHOR IN SCIENCE, Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1974, page 97)

6. (I am committed here to "semantic truth" as it has been delineated so exhaustively by Harold Lee. Two sentences may serve to illustrate. "The relation between what is in the realm of discourse and what is in the realm of experience is a semantic relation. . . . The semantic relation of truth is to be found in the way that the symbol system fits experience." "A Fitting Theory of Truth," TULANE STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY, XIV (1965), pp. 93-110 (page 97 here). Full treatment is given in Lee's last book: PERCEPTS, CONCEPTS AND THEORETIC KNOWLEDGE, Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1973.

7. INTELLIGENCE IN THE MODERN WORLD; John Dewey's Philosophy, Joseph Ratner (Ed.), New York: Random, 1939, page 807

8. Ibid., page 858

9. (Given), page 13

10. Francis Hunkins, INVOLVING STUDENTS IN QUESTIONING, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1976, page 227

(Matter included in the "Coda" here has been taken from Wolfe, AN ENGLISH GRAMMAR, St. John's: MUN Press, 1977.)